Charmaine Lee is a New York-based vocalist from Sydney, Australia. Her music is predominantly improvised, favoring a uniquely personal approach to vocal expression concerned with spontaneity, playfulness, and risk-taking. Beyond extended vocal technique, **Charmaine** uses amplification, feedback, and microphones to augment and distort the voice.

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Written interview with Francisco Merino, May 2025

Francisco Merino : Hi Charmaine, thanks for taking the time for this interview, can you start by quickly presenting yourself ?

Charmaine Lee : Hi Francisco!! Thanks so much for having this conversation with me. I'm a vocalist and electronics artist based in New York. I grew up in Sydney in a musical family — my dad played jazz guitar and my mom was a classical pianist and percussionist — so sound was always around me from the beginning. I make music where voice and electronics blur, where the body and the circuitry are both sources of sound and language. A lot of what I do is improvised, but it's rooted in this long process of listening, failing, trying again, and letting the space I'm in shape what happens next. I think of my practice as a way of translating personal language into shared experience.

FM : How did you first discover experimental music, and what made you stay here ?
When did you first begin to see yourself as an artist ? Was there a turning point ?

CL : I've always been drawn to sounds that didn't fit neatly anywhere, things that felt raw or visceral. In high school I was obsessed with jazz vocalists like Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Betty Carter, alongside pop icons like Whitney Houston, Britney Spears, and Mariah Carey. Even then I think I was drawn more to intensity and individuality than genre.

Everything really shifted when I did my masters at New England Conservatory and joined Joe Morris's Free Music Ensemble. That world of improvisation completely changed how I listened, not sound as something to perfect, but something to inhabit. We played music by Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton,

Steve Lacy, and Eric Dolphy. My real eureka moment was our first rehearsal playing Ornette's Science Fiction. Hearing Asha Puthli on that record totally cracked something open for me.

Because I hadn't gone to music school before that, I think I avoided some of the jadedness that can come with institutional training. I don't really see music as divided between "inside" and "outside" the barlines. There's real experimentation happening everywhere. For me it's just music, it's either alive or it's not.

I still sometimes struggle with calling myself an artist. Early on I internalized this idea that it was indulgent. But over time I've come to see it as a responsibility. To take full advantage of an artist's life, to travel, read widely, think deeply, draw connections, and offer something back. More and more, it feels like my role is about staying awake, and helping other people wake up too. That's kind of become my personal mission.

FM : What drew you specifically to sound as your medium, rather than other forms ?
Do you consider your work as part of a larger artistic practice, or is it fundamentally only rooted in sonic experience ?

CL : For me, sound is the hero. I think a lot about something Morton Feldman talked about, which is really just letting sound exist on its own terms, not forcing it to serve narrative or structure. That really resonates with me. Music feels uniquely intangible in a way no other medium is. You can't hold it. You can't freeze it. It only exists while it's happening, and then it's gone. And at the same time, it can be incredibly sentimental, deeply emotional, sometimes overwhelmingly so.

What draws me to sound is that it captures body, mind, and soul all at once. A single sound can hold a whole world of feeling that written language just can't reach. You can write paragraphs trying to explain an emotion, and then one tone, one breath, one burst of feedback can say it instantly. That complexity is really powerful to me.

I love that sound lives in this strange space between control and disappearance. It's fleeting, but it leaves residue in the body. You feel it vibrating in your chest, in your throat, in the room, and even after it stops, something stays with you. That's what keeps me here. Sound lets me work directly with sensation, memory, and emotion without needing to translate everything into words first. It feels honest in that way.

So even though my work crosses into performance, electronics, space, and gesture, it always comes back to sound itself. That's the core. Everything else just supports that moment of listening.

FM : Your practice blends extended vocal techniques with modular synthesis, how do you decide whether a moment calls for analog electronics, pure voice, or both ?
How do you see the voice and the machine, organic and technology, interacting within your work ?
What drew you to modular synths, and how dit it expand, or conflict with your vocal practice ?

CL : It's almost never a rational decision in the moment. I'm listening for what's missing. Sometimes the naked voice feels complete on its own, like there's already enough fragility or intensity or detail there. Other times I want friction, dimension, resistance, something that pushes back. That's usually when the electronics come in.

I don't really think in terms of organic versus technology. Once I'm performing, it all feels like one system. The voice goes into the machine, the machine comes back into my body, and there's this feedback loop where I'm constantly adjusting to what I'm hearing and feeling. The electronics don't sit "outside" me. They become part of my nervous system onstage. Tiny changes in breath or posture suddenly reshape the sound, and then that sound reshapes how I move. It's very physical.

Modular synths drew me in because they're unstable and tactile. You're literally patching together relationships between sounds. There's no preset safety net. Every setup is provisional, and that feels close to how I approach voice and improvisation. You're building a temporary language every time. It expanded my vocal practice by forcing me to listen differently, to leave more space, to accept unpredictability. Sometimes it conflicts, sure, especially when the system gets unruly, but I actually love that. The conflict creates new gestures. It pulls me out of habits.

I think of the voice and the modular as collaborators rather than tools. The voice carries memory and emotion and breath. The machine brings scale, texture, and this kind of alien perspective. Where they meet is where things get interesting for me. That overlap lets me access sounds I couldn't reach with either one alone, and it keeps the work alive.

(screenshot,Kou Records' [Youtube](#) channel)

FM : Do you approach studio work differently than live performance ? Is the act of recording an artistic object itself ? Can you walk us through your compositional methodology and how do you decide when a piece is "finished," especially given the open-ended nature of noise and improvisation ? What roles do improvisation and structure play in your compositions and are they oppositional or intertwined ?

CL : Yeah, I definitely approach studio work differently than live performance, but they're deeply connected for me. A lot of my process is performance-driven. Even when I'm recording, I'm thinking like a performer first. I want the body to be present in the sound. Live is about stepping into uncertainty in real time, feeling the room, responding to energy, letting risk be part of the piece. The studio is slower, more reflective, but I still try to keep that sense of immediacy.

Recording is absolutely an artistic object for me. It's not documentation. It's composition. But I'm not interested in over-editing things into perfection. Even when there are concrete compositional ideas or concepts behind a piece, I like to leave some rawness in there. I want it grounded in humanity and a little bit of magic. Breaths, instability, small imperfections, those are often the things that carry the emotional weight.

My compositional methodology usually starts with improvisation. I generate a lot of material intuitively, through performance, and then I listen back and start noticing patterns. Certain gestures keep returning, certain textures feel charged, and that's where structure begins to emerge. I don't usually start with a fixed form. I let the form reveal itself through repetition and listening.

I also feel like I'm constantly composing, even when I'm improvising. I'm making compositional decisions every second: about density, timing, pacing, when to enter, when to pull back. So a big part of the process is trusting that instinct in real time. That trust feels essential. It's where the work stays alive.

Deciding when something is finished is one of the hardest parts. I usually stop when the piece stops asking for more. There's a quiet sense of completion, even if it still feels open-ended. With noise and improvisation, I'm not looking for traditional resolution. I'm listening for honesty, for coherence, for whether the emotional arc feels true.

Improvisation and structure aren't oppositional for me at all. They're completely intertwined. Improvisation builds the language, structure gives it shape. Even my most open pieces have an underlying architecture, and even my most composed work leaves room for intuition to intervene. That tension between control and surrender is really where everything lives for me.

FM : What's your relationship with gear ? Do you consider it a means to an end or a creative partner in itself ? Do you let your gear guide your process, or do you force it into your conceptual frameworks ? How much does the *how* you do something dictate the *why* you do it ?

CL : My relationship with gear has been slow and intentional. If you mapped it over time, it wouldn't be a straight line, more like a gradual rise, a period of expansion, and then slowing down again. My voice has always been central, and I'm careful about adding tools. Part of that is being self-taught, but part of it is wanting to get to the essence of an idea rather than executing something directly with gear.

Early on I focused a lot on what my voice could do with amplification and mixing, even simple things like using a contact mic on my throat. Later I became more interested in augmenting and spatializing that vocabulary, which brought in more processing. But most of what you hear still originates in the body.

I think of gear as a creative partner, but not a permanent one. I like learning a tool deeply and sometimes putting it aside, just to see what it leaves behind in my vocabulary. Often the tool exists to provoke something new rather than become a fixture.

It's always a negotiation. I come in with ideas, but the system pushes back, and that shapes the work. A lot of the time the how leads the why. The voice, electronics, space, and feedback all become one ecosystem, and that back-and-forth is what keeps things alive for me.

FM : If I am not mistaken, you've been involved with sound art, performance with a background and practice in academic music studies. Do you see a convergence between these spheres or do you think they are different in how they treat sound ? Do you feel there's a shift in how experimental musicians engage with institutional training today ? Did you feel you had to "unlearn" anything to enter the noise or experimental music world ?

CL : I actually don't feel like I was very burdened by institutional training, mostly because I was only in music school for two years, during my masters. It felt more like a hot flash of framework and inspiration than something that deeply reshaped me. I already had this raw instinct around sound and improvisation, and school just gave me some language and context for things I was already curious about.

At the same time, I didn't grow up listening to noise or experimental music, so I don't feel especially tied to any one lineage or aesthetic. In some ways that's been a gift. I don't feel obligated to follow a

particular genre or style, and I think some scenes can become a little hardened around what's considered "correct." I've always been more interested in building my own language than fitting into an existing one.

I do feel like there's a shift happening now too. It feels less binary than before. People move more fluidly between institutions and DIY spaces, taking what's useful from formal training while staying rooted in personal practice. There's more permission to exist in multiple worlds at once.

So I kind of came in sideways. I took what felt useful from academic spaces, structure, attention, discipline, and let the rest fall away. I never really had to unlearn much because I didn't fully absorb those rules in the first place. My practice has always been driven more by listening and instinct than by theory, and I've tried to protect that.

FM : The cover of your album *KNVF* has a playful absurdity. How do you approach humor in your work ? Noise music often walks a line between the serious and the absurd. Do you find freedom in that ambiguity ? Do you ever intentionally mislead or confuse audiences as part of your artistic practice ?

CL : I think joy and fun are often weirdly denigrated in new music and so-called "serious" music, as if seriousness automatically equals depth. That's never made sense to me. It doesn't feel reflective of life at all. Life is absurd and tender and funny and devastating, often all at once. Why would music strip that out?

For me, humor and play aren't add-ons, they're fundamental. They're an honest expression of who I am, and they're a way of letting the work breathe. Noise already lives on this knife edge between intensity and absurdity, and I find a lot of freedom there. A sound can be frightening, ridiculous, intimate, and beautiful all at the same time.

I'm not trying to mislead or trick an audience, but I do like gently destabilizing expectations. If someone comes in bracing for something austere and instead encounters joy, awkwardness, or surprise, that shift can open listening in a deeper way. Playfulness creates vulnerability, and vulnerability creates connection. For me, that's as serious as it gets.

FM : I saw you perform a few times now, and every time I was impress in how you use your body : an intense presence emerges from you while performing, it seems that your movements and body language in general are necessary to achieve some or your vocal techniques, am I wrong ? Do you choreograph your use of body and breath ?

CL : You're not wrong. The body is completely central to how the sound happens. I don't choreograph anything in a formal way, but movement is necessary. Music is and should be an embodied practice. There's always an implicit pulse and an explicit pulse happening at the same time, even when it doesn't look rhythmic on the surface. Those things are constantly present, guiding how I breathe, shift weight, approach the mic, or move through space.

When I was first starting out, I used movement very consciously as a way to break through psychological self-consciousness, to get out of my head and back into my body. It was a tool for permission. Now it feels more like part of the flow. Sometimes the movement lines up clearly with the sound, and sometimes it doesn't at all, but that underlying pulse is always there, organizing things quietly underneath.

There's also a certain athletic quality to it that I'm really interested in. Endurance, stamina, balance, coordination, listening while physically exerting yourself. It's not about spectacle, it's about staying present inside intensity. Certain sounds require specific tensions, postures, or breath patterns, so the body ends up carrying a vocabulary over time. What you're seeing is that language unfolding in real time.

I think of it less as choreography and more as listening with my whole body. Tiny physical decisions become compositional decisions. The intensity comes from that feedback loop between body and sound. I'm responding to what I hear, what the room gives back, what my nervous system is doing. It's about letting the body be part of the instrument, and trusting that intelligence in the moment.

FM : I was in NYC a few weeks ago, and we shared the stage one night, we talked about the performance you did a few days before at the [Ende Tymes festival](). I saw pictures and short videos of it online, you performed a feedback piece with a parabolic microphone and a bunch of amps. Again, the position of your body seemed to be fully part of the process of creating the sound, it made me think of a mixture between Alvin Lucier's *Bird and person dyning* and the confrontations performances between the body and the feedback of Randy H.Y. Yau, or more recently, Yan Jun. Can you tell me more about this new performance, is it a new direction your taking or do you sometimes adapt your practice and gear for some specific shows ?

CL : That piece came out of curiosity around spatial feedback and how much the body can actively shape sound. For that performance I was working with three vintage tube amps and a parabolic mic, with feedback as the main material. Randall helped produce and sound design the setup, so a lot of it was about tuning the system first, really listening to how the tubes saturate and break, and then letting my body enter that circuit.

The parabolic mic is incredibly sensitive, so tiny movements suddenly matter a lot. Shifting your weight, changing the angle of your head, even breathing differently can completely reshape what comes back. I'm listening for those interstitial spaces between partials, the little "breaks" where something unstable opens up, and trying to stay inside those fragile zones. It feels less like playing an instrument and more like stepping into a living feedback loop between amps, breath, and attention.

I wouldn't say it's a new direction so much as an extension of what I already do, just with different tools. I adapt my practice depending on the context. Some spaces invite intimacy, others invite confrontation, and this setup really leans into that embodied, almost athletic side of performance.

I'm a huge fan of Randy Yau and Yan Jun, and I actually saw Alvin Lucier perform *Bird and Person Dyning* live years ago, which was incredibly inspiring. That lineage of treating feedback as something you physically enter definitely lives in what I'm doing, even as I'm always trying to arrive at it through my own vocabulary.

FM : Do you feel that living and working in New York City, so historically tied to the avant-garde, affects your creative practice ?

CL : Yeah, definitely. Living and working in New York City shapes my practice in a real way. There's this constant density of people, ideas, sounds, and histories all layered on top of each other. You feel the weight of the avant-garde here, but you also feel how alive and unfinished it is. It's not something frozen in the past, it's something that keeps getting rewritten.

At the same time, New York teaches you resilience. It teaches you how to move fast, how to stay focused inside chaos, how to make work even when everything feels overwhelming. There's a lot of cross-pollination between scenes, between disciplines, between institutional and DIY spaces, and that fluidity really feeds me.

What's probably most influential for me right now is community. I basically live at [Circular Ruin](), which is Randall Dunn's studio in Brooklyn, and I spend a huge amount of time there. There's this beautiful ecosystem of world-class musicians, producers, and engineers coming through, working on projects that span film, rock, indie, classical, and experimental music. Being around that level of craft and curiosity on a daily basis is incredibly grounding and inspiring. It reminds me that experimental work doesn't exist in isolation, it lives inside a much bigger creative web, and that sense of shared practice really sustains me.

FM : What kind of social or artistic communities have been essential to your development as a sound artist and do you feel the experimental or noise scene offers something that other scenes don't, artistically, socially, or politically ?

Community has honestly been everything for me. I didn't develop in isolation. I learned by being around people who were committed to listening, experimenting, failing publicly, and trying again. A lot of my growth came from informal spaces, shared bills, late-night conversations after shows. That proximity shapes you.

Early on, stores like Thousands of Dead Gods were huge for me. Especially because noise and experimental music still live largely offline, not everything is streaming or easy to find, so community becomes the access point. You learn through people, through shared listening, through being physically present. That generosity made the scene feel human and welcoming.

What feels special about experimental and noise communities is the emphasis on process over product. There's permission to be unfinished, to take risks. Socially it's often less hierarchical, people help each other, share space and knowledge. Politically, it exists outside mainstream expectations, building small ecosystems based on care and curiosity.

FM : How do other art forms, cinema, literature, visual art etc… influence your work ?
Are there specific artists or works who have influenced how you think about sound or form ?

CL : Other art forms influence me constantly. I don't really separate them in my mind. Cinema, literature, visual art, they all shape how I think about pacing, space, and attention. Film especially has taught me a lot about duration and silence, about letting something unfold slowly without forcing meaning too quickly.

I'm super inspired by that lineage of classic auteurs, people like Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, Orson Welles, and Alfred Hitchcock. What I love about their work is how psychological and physical it feels at the same time, how they use restraint, tension, and negative space. They treat time almost like a material, and emotion can live inside very simple gestures.

More than specific references though, I'm drawn to artists who leave room for ambiguity, who trust the audience to stay present. That's something I'm always chasing in sound too, creating forms that feel spacious and emotionally complex without needing to explain themselves.

FM : What are you working on right now ? Are there any future projects you're particularly excited about ? That was my last question, thanks again for your answers. Do you have anything else to add ?

CL : Thanks for the opportunity to think about these questions, Francisco!

A lot of this year is actually going toward building infrastructure for [Kou Records](#) — we have ten records coming out, so there's a huge amount of behind-the-scenes work happening right now. It's intense, but it also feels deeply connected to my artistic practice. The label has become its own kind of composition.

Alongside that, I'm in the middle of composing a new piece for myself and JACK Quartet, which has been really exciting, thinking about how my language translates into a chamber context.

I'm also developing a trio with Randall that expands the parabolic mic and feedback work, with sheng player Li Chin Li and contrabass clarinetist John McCowen. It feels like a continuation of that embodied feedback practice, but now stretched across multiple bodies and instruments.

I spend a lot of time at Circular Ruin with Randall Dunn, working on releases and being around musicians and engineers across experimental, classical, film, rock, and indie worlds. That cross-pollination feeds everything.

I think what I'm most excited about right now is building long-form projects and ecosystems rather than isolated works, letting relationships and ideas develop over time.

And I guess the only thing I'd add is that I'm still learning how to listen. That feels like the throughline of everything I do. Staying curious, staying embodied, staying connected to community. That's what keeps the work alive for me.